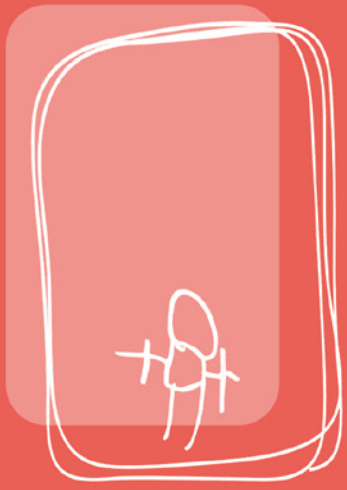
ROUTLEDGE

TEACHING THROUGH TEXTS



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Teaching Through Texts

Using a wide range of genres including poetry, playscripts, picture-books, performance texts, comics, classics, cinema texts, novels, non-fiction and pupils' own narratives, this book seeks to show how texts can be used to make literacy exciting and pleasurable in the primary classroom.

Drawing on many popular as well as literary texts the contributors write with enthusiasm about opportunities for creative teaching and learning. They also provide many examples of good practice to promote literacy, both inside and outside the Literacy Hour.

While *Teaching Through Texts* includes a discussion of the National Literacy Strategy, it also looks ahead to the new literacies of the future.

Holly Anderson is joint Language Co-ordinator at Homerton College, Cambridge. She has many years of experience as a teacher in early years and has published widely in the field. **Morag Styles** is Reader in Children's Literature and Language at Homerton College, Cambridge. She recently published *Opening the Nursery Door* with Routledge.

Teaching Through Texts

Promoting literacy through
popular and literary texts
in the primary classroom

Edited by Holly Anderson
and Morag Styles

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This book is dedicated with affection and respect to the memory of our friend and colleague Helen Arnold

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Introduction

Teaching through texts—contexts, conventions and contributors

Morag Styles

In the last fifteen or so years, and regardless of the secretary of state for education in office, we have witnessed in Britain an unprecedented focus of attention on literacy with wave after wave of initiatives from government agencies. In early 1999 the National Literacy Strategy[1] decreed that for one hour each day—the Literacy Hour—every primary school up and down the land will teach reading and writing according to strict and detailed time and content guidelines. There is no legislation in place to make the National Literacy Strategy compulsory, but everyone concerned with the literacy of primary-school children knows that its directives must be followed. Margaret Meek[2] told us many years ago that *we teach what we think reading is*. The autonomy of teachers in respect of what, when, where and how to teach reading has disappeared. Indeed, the Labour Government has to a significant extent staked its credibility on the success of this venture, promising to deliver markedly improved results in Reading and Writing SATs[3] before the next election.

As usual, teachers are in the firing line for what is as much a political as an educational strategy, though the genuine concern of those leading the NLS[4] for improving literacy cannot be doubted. What is deeply frustrating to many practitioners is that research into and classroom evidence of economic factors underlining educational underachievement, such as poverty, racism and problems associated with a growing 'underclass', have been ignored in favour of the panacea that adherence to the NLS is expected to provide. Furthermore, an understanding of literacy as a set of culturally developed practices is singularly lacking from the NLS. Other commentators deplore the exorbitant costs involved in a programme which, on the one hand, has been imposed on teachers and, on the other, has been cobbled together at high speed. That this is the best use of taxpayers' money to promote literacy remains questionable.

Debates about how best to teach reading explode regularly in Britain, and different educational ideologies gain ascendancy at different times. The 1980s and 1990s have been marked by an increasingly traditional and mechanistic view of teaching and learning, whereas the dominant ideology of the 1970s was liberal and, in small but significant quarters, progressive. The major investigation into

literacy known as the Bullock Report (1975) seems light years away from the language and values of the NLS. The following extract is typical of the former:

> Controversy about the teaching of reading has a long history, and throughout it there has been the assumption, at least the hope, that a panacea can be found that will make everything right…*there is no one method, medium, approach, device or philosophy that holds the key to the process of reading*. We believe that the knowledge does exist to improve the teaching of reading, but that it does not lie in the triumphant discovery, or re-discovery, of a particular formula [emphasis added].[5]

The Bullock Report stresses that no one strategy can be expected to work for the range of difficulties associated with literacy experienced by a small but significant minority of pupils. In contrast, the sometimes uncritical zeal and conformity of those at the centre of this initiative have some of the unhealthy trappings of evangelical movements. Writing before the NLS was even a twinkle in John Stannard's[6] eye, Peter Traves was alert to the differences between what he called 'proper and improper literacy'. His notion of 'improper' literacy could be levelled at the NLS for all its good intentions and (some) good practice: 'the dominance of a particular and… mechanistic definition…[of literacy, paying] little or no attention to the broad and complex web of behavioural and intellectual patterns that underpin real reading'.[7] Margaret Meek, Hilary Minns, Henrietta Dombey, Myra Barrs and her team at the Centre for Language in Primary Education, each having conducted sustained, detailed, pupil- and teacher-centred research into the learning (and teaching) of reading, have shown us that 'complex web' in action.[8]

Eve Bearne also has written extensively in this field: in her Postscript to *Greater Expectations* she shows the mistake in the argument that if teachers only got better at teaching by following a particular method or programme, then the standards of children's work in literacy would magically improve.

> Intervention to raise standards of literacy is…a highly complex matter …not a straightforward link between cause and effect…. [R]aising standards of reading and writing means setting up an environment in which learning can be most effective rather than adhering to particular methods or materials….[9]

Using Matthew Arnold's telling metaphor of 'ignorant armies who clash by night' to describe some literacy developments before the advent of the NLS, Eve Bearne underlines the importance of building 'a critical *theor*y of literacy in education which…is dynamic, recursive and cumulative rather than a linear progress through clearly defined stages…[and which] can take into account the cultures of home and school' [emphasis added].[10] Indeed, one of criticisms most often levelled at the NLS is the lack at its heart of a coherent theory.

It is an open secret that one of the reasons behind the Literacy Hour is to combat what has been described as a large tail of reading failure in Britain (i.e. the higher percentage of children here than in Europe who are slow in learning to read). If this statistic is correct (and we remain unconvinced) other factors, such as the age when schooling begins, come into play. At any rate, the Literacy Hour has been imposed on *all* the pupils of England and Wales aged between 5 and 11. What effect it will have on the lowest achievers remains to be seen, but there are worries about boredom, disaffection and underachievement for average and above-average pupils in a curriculum which spends forty minutes of the daily Literacy Hour on whole-class teaching. If these lessons are pitched to the understanding of those who find literacy most challenging, keeping the most academic children involved and interested, day-in, day-out, will be difficult and could prove counterproductive.

Wise teachers will make sensible compromises and adapt the NLS to the needs of their own classes, but the widespread criticism of British schooling in the last ten years by the media, politicians and, most perniciously, a chief inspector of schools who has lost the respect of the majority of teachers, means that many will lack the confidence to deviate from a rigorous programme of literacy teaching. And the hard won right of schools and teachers to have at least the choice of working in mixed-ability settings, has been lost as the Literacy Hour prescribes ability grouping.

Furthermore, the content of the NLS is underscored by what many in the teaching profession have been resisting for years—explicit teaching of extensive rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation, while phonics (rather than the research-based notion of phonological awareness[11]) is privileged as the way to approach reading. Even prime minister Tony Blair exhorts teachers to use phonics more extensively in speeches and interviews! While all those contributing to this book fully support efforts to raise standards in children's abilities to manage the technicalities of language effectively, and while we believe children need to master the basics of punctuation, spelling and grammar in the primary school, the sheer quantity of technical knowledge of language that non-specialist primary teachers and their pupils are expected to master seems to us a serious misjudgement of the strategy.

To make space for the Literacy Hour, the arts curriculum has been sabotaged. How much time and instruction will be spent on painting, drawing and other artistic and creative activities in early years' classrooms of the future, let alone those at the top end of the primary school? The idea of play as the intellectual work of young children which used to be the cornerstone of early years' philosophy is difficult to sustain in a packed and demanding curriculum which includes the reception year. Areas like music, history and geography have already had time (and, in the former case, expertise) decimated.

There is also a serious gap at the centre of the NLS—hardly a mention of visual literacy which, with all the new technologies children are expected to master, will surely be one of the dominant literacies of the twenty-first century. We fail to

value the reading of pictures, films, television, CD ROM, performance texts and cartoon strips at our peril. *Teaching Through Texts* gives pictorial literacy the high profile we believe it deserves.

It is the job of those of us who have been in literacy education for some time to take the long-term view and to examine critically all new initiatives, particularly blanket ones, imposed on our pupils and primary teachers. We must rise above fads and factions; we have seen educational initiatives come and go, and we must weigh up each using evidence and experience wisely to enlighten our thinking. As has already been indicated, there are many questions one would wish to raise about the NLS, but now that it is with us, it is only fair to give it a chance, monitoring carefully the most and least effective parts of the strategy. There are also, clearly, some advantages. The greatest of these, it seems to the editors of this book, is putting a wide range of literature at the heart of the Literacy Hour.

Never before have teachers been expected to cover such diverse genres, authors and texts with children. While we have reservations about some of the activities expected of teachers and their pupils at sentence and word level[12] (to use the jargon of the NLS), the guidance materials contain many good ideas which will be helpful to teachers. The emphasis on being explicit about learning purposes and the need to foster closer relationships between reading and writing are positive developments. Perhaps most importantly, working regularly at whole-text level on traditional, 'classic' and modern fiction, non-fiction and poetry can, we believe, do nothing but good. Furthermore, there is embedded an explicit commitment throughout NLS guidance to teaching literature from a wide range of cultures, which is an excellent innovation.

We approve also of the detailed reference to the different sub-genres into which literary genres can be broken, though we recognise that this will be taxing at first for many teachers. The coverage of poetry, for example, is remarkably extensive, and teachers need some reassurance that the categories and technical terms can be quickly mastered, and that some are less important than others. (The difference between concrete and shape poetry, for example, is certainly not something teachers or children should worry about! And the recommendation that children write calligrams at 7 or 8 seems to us unimportant in comparison with getting this age group to enjoy writing poetry and to do so with some confidence.) Although one might quibble with having to teach particular sub-genres at particular times, well-organised teachers will soon accommodate this, and it does have the advantage of avoiding overlap and omission. And, after all, sensible teachers will be flexible—if there are pressing reasons for tackling literature not prescribed for that term, they will cover it, outside of the Literacy Hour if necessary.

While we welcome the full and rich new emphasis on teaching through texts, we also recognise the demands it will make on an already exhausted teaching profession. Change can be only gradual: it takes time to build up a wide repertoire of children's literature, and perhaps even longer to feel confident about using it

wisely. The NLS training materials can help, but many teachers will require further support. This is one of the purposes behind this book.

Having worked closely with teachers for many years in training partner-ships, and on advanced diplomas and courses relating to professional development,[13] we know that quite a number feel insecure about their own knowledge of children's literature and how best to teach it well at text level. Some will find the tight structure of the Literacy Hour liberating, and it may well improve their practice. Others will find it restrictive. For both groups it is worth remembering that the Literacy Hour is unlikely to survive in its current prescriptive form for very long: it will evolve, as all initiatives do, and probably shake down into something more manageable and flexible. In the meantime, this book aims to serve the interests of inexperienced teachers and trainees who are uncertain how to tackle a wide range of literature in the classroom, working within and without the Literacy Hour format. We aim also to provide inspiration and new ideas, and to indicate a wider than normal range of genres with a strong emphasis on popular culture, for those who are already confident about teaching through texts.

We begin with the centrality of poetry in the early years. In '*Give Yourself a Hug*: reading between the rhymes', Vivienne Smith, quoting Margaret Meek, locates early experiences of verse firmly in the home, the community and in children's popular culture: 'Poetry is never better understood than in childhood, when it is felt in the blood and along the bone.'[14] Unlike those who complain that children do not know nursery rhymes these days, Smith believes that such rhymes are embedded in their culture and deeply entrenched in their memories.

Vivienne Smith makes a persuasive case for the way children use rhyme to define themselves as individuals and to bond them to family and community. Her argument takes in the pleasures of nonsense and the affirmative friendship rituals and group oracy of playground rhymes (which she calls winningly the prodigal son of nursery rhyme). Building on this firm foun-dation, and giving examples from her own early years' classroom, Smith shows how far teachers can take infants in a poetry curriculum which includes Robert Frost, Christina Rossetti and Grace Nichols. She argues that real 'listening skills' are involved in responding to poetry and she shows how the rhythm and music in verse are what first evoke children's response. In an insightful conclusion, Vivienne Smith suggests that poetry helps children to look inwards, developing a relationship with themselves 'to affirm the people they are'.

Helen Bromley also is interested in the popular culture of childhood, but in 'Never be without a *Beano*' her particular focus is comics—how they produce their effects, how sophisticated they are, how they are read by children and where their appeal lies. She demonstrates how the *Beano* provides both predictability and challenge—endearing and subversive characters (just think of Dennis the Menace and Gnasher!), intertextuality, multilayered meanings, self-referential

jokes and a wide range of text types, including non-fiction. She shows how the *Beano* respects its readers by making demands on them, while never losing sight of the importance of amusement.

Helen Bromley demonstrates how any issue of the *Beano* provides endless possibilities for work at the word level—there are puns, alliterations, jokes and rhymes aplenty. More challengingly, the *Beano* changes font, print, direction and voice to make subtle points or present ambiguity, such as the 'Notes from the Editor' which to be fully understood require extensive knowledge of different genres. Finally, she shows how comics offer children a wide cultural space in which to locate themselves and how, in turn, far from being flimsy items of popular literature, they are often hoarded and catalogued as well as valued and treasured by their readers.

We move from Dennis the Menace to Minnie the Minx in Chris Doddington's chapter, which looks at the centrality of character in fiction's appeal to young readers. Drawing on diverse characters in children's literature—Little Lord Fauntleroy, Hans Christian Andersen's Little Match Girl, Captain Hook and Roald Dahl's BFG—Chris Doddington shows how young readers learn first to discriminate between heroes and villains, then to appreciate subtler variations. Children begin by identifying with charismatic characters like Max *(Where the Wild Things Are)*, George (Blyton), Alice, Huckleberry Finn and Anne of Green Gables, and if exposed to a wide enough range of fiction develop an understanding of the complexity of human beings.

Characterisation is often the hook which draws children into novels, and it is through the actions of characters that they learn about motivation, morality and making mistakes. Taking Kitty from Fine's *Goggle-Eyes* as an example, Chris Doddington considers how a character is gradually built up and slowly revealed in a well-constructed novel through appearance, context, plot, dialogue and interaction with other characters. She goes on to show how the work of some leading educational philosophers can enlighten drama approaches to character. Overall, Chris Doddington's chapter suggests that reading fiction teaches us in a safe way what it means to be human.

Nick Warburton is also interested in characters and their motives and viewpoints, as his chapter focuses on what working on plays can offer young readers. He discusses the importance of giving children opportunities to imagine themselves in other people's shoes; presenting the 'other' by using the self to serve the text can help them to understand themselves, as well as to appreciate what this particular literature offers. Nick Warburton goes on to liken play scripts to musical scores, describing them as sets of instructions; bringing the script to life with its endless possibilities is like reading music.

'When children put on a play, they can cope with texts which are initially perplexing and with language richer and more strange than they are likely to encounter elsewhere.' This is as true when young children read, and especially act, contemporary plays written specially for them, as when tackling Shakespeare and other highly regarded dramatists. But Nick Warburton is concerned also